

Research in Practice Seminar Series

Kingston
University
London

Managing your digital communications: A focus on
email and smartphone strategies at work

Dr Emma Russell

e.russell@kingston.ac.uk

Today's presentation



- The emergence of email as the dominant communication medium in office life
- Project One: My research on email interruptions
- Project Two:
 - My research on strategies for dealing with email and smartphone
 - Addictive behaviours and pathologies
- Practical suggestions for improving email management at work

A quick survey



- Put your hand up if:
 - You use email to communicate at work
 - You are on-line throughout the working day
 - You have set up your phone/mobile device to receive work email
 - Your phone will alert you when you have a new work email
 - Outside of work hours?
 - You receive over 50 work email each day
- If your hand is still up... how do you feel!!!???

Project One

- What are interruptions?
 - Events that divert an individual's attention away from a task or processing sequence (however briefly) in order to engage with another activity.
 - No control over their emergence.
 - Triggered by something or someone external to the individual's cognitive world.
 - *Van den Berg et.al., 1996; Speier et.al., 2003*



The dominant research focus

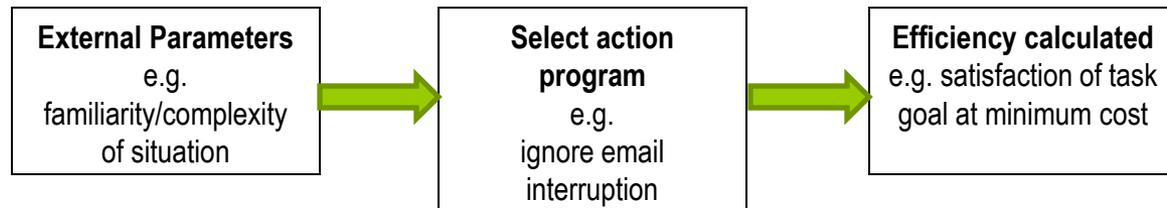
- Use of experiments
- Interruptions have been enforced
- External parameters
 - Task complexity, mode (e.g. audible) of interruption
- External outcomes
 - Speed of response, errors, completion time
- Interruptions are largely disruptive and should be limited (Jackson et.al.,2001)

Email interruptions

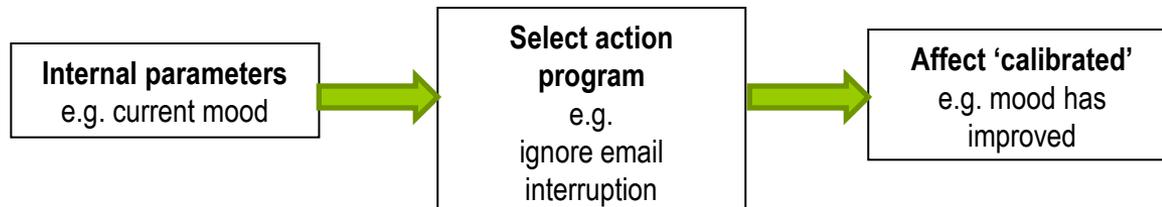
- Fundamentally different:
 - Controllable
 - E.g. email's three stage delivery
 1. Alert
 2. Check (choice)
 3. Process (choice)

Examining controllable behaviour

- Action theories:



- Affect-regulation theories:



- Personality matters...?

Three research phases

- Phase One: exploratory study
 - What strategies and why?
 - Well-being
 - Bored = respond to email
 - Too many demands = email annoys them
 - Individual Differences
 - ‘Introverts’ = email has improved their relationships
 - ‘Task focused’ = email wastes time

Three research phases

- Diary study approach
 - Phase Two: internal and external factors and strategy choice
 - Phase Three: multi-goal achievement considered
- Multi-level modelling

Results – Phase Two



- Well-being predicts people's response
 - When bored people go straight into email after an alert
 - When anxious/angry people spend longer in email system
- People's response predicts well-being
 - Spend longer in email = feel more active and motivated (if you were bored or tired before)
- Individual differences in strategy chosen and well-being changes
 - Neurotic (worriers) feel more anxious and angry after dealing with email (especially if they were already anxious and angry)
 - Extraverts feel more active and motivated after dealing with email (especially if they have spent longer in the system).

Results – Phase Three



- Different strategic behaviours are associated with different goal reasons and priorities
 - People who delay responding to an email after checking believes this helps the fulfilment of the 'current' task goal
 - People who spend a long time dealing with email believe this helps the fulfilment of 'other' work goals
- Different personalities prioritise different goals
 - People who have low 'altruism' motives choose strategies that help the fulfilment of well-being goals
 - Neurotics (worriers) choose strategies that they believe help them to fulfil 'current' task goals
- Wellbeing is affected by one's belief that different goals have been fulfilled
 - People get more angry and anxious if they choose a strategy that they believe hinders well-being goal fulfilment
 - People feel gloomier if they choose a strategy that they believe hinders 'other' work goal fulfilment

Implications

○ Research:

- Extend current action theories – well-being, personality and non-work goals are important in understanding action choice and for calculating efficiency
- Need to study interruptions in natural environment, using internal parameters

○ Practice:

- Neurotic people (worriers) should turn off their email – especially when feeling in a bad mood
- Extraverts should keep email on, and should be recruited into jobs that require high levels of email use
- When bored or tired, spending time in email can improve well-being

Project Two

- Maladaptive strategies for dealing with email
- Two phases
 - Phase One: a taxonomy of strategies for receiving, sending and managing email today.
 - Reasons for use
 - Acknowledging 'bad habits' that have negative repercussions
 - Phase Two: A survey to establish:
 - Goal reasons attributed to strategies
 - Relationship with personality
 - Relationship with well-being

Another little survey

- Put your hand up if:
 - You check your email continuously throughout the day, regardless of whether you have received an alert (addictive checking)
 - You get 'phantom' alerts
 - You engage in absent-presence
- These are existing and known 'maladaptive' or 'pathological' email strategies. They have become habitual and indicate evidence of addictive behaviour.



Phase One: The interviews

- 28 participants across a range of organisations, job levels and job types.
- Using desktop and mobile email communications for work.
- 1-2 hour interviews
- Sample questions:
 - Do you think any of your communication partners have a problem with the strategies you use to send your email? Why?
 - Are there any strategies for managing your email that you no longer use? Why?
 - Are there any strategies that other people use in receiving email that you:
 - Like
 - Dislike

Key findings

- 88 strategies reported, across 10 themes
- 8 addictive behaviours reported
- 8 reason categories reported
 - Work efficiency
 - Improving well-being
 - Feel in control
 - Be true to one's 'self'
 - Concern for others
 - Ease/practicality
 - Habit/automatic
 - Company/industry policy
- Strategies can be positively or negatively construed

Example 1

- Theme: 'normal strategies for receiving email'
- Strategy: 'I have audible or visual alerts turned on and I check email on alert'
- Positive Reason: I like to feel on top of things (control goal met)
- Negative Reason: It can be annoying or distracting to others (concern for others goal not met)



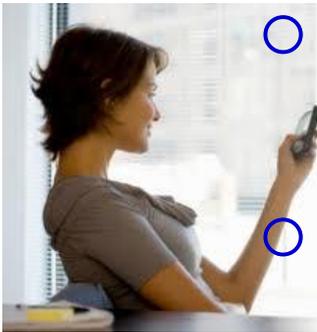
Example 2

- Theme: ‘strategies for crafting email’
- Strategy: ‘I write lengthy emails that cover multiple points’
- Positive Reason: I am a verbose person (self truth goal met)
- Negative Reason: They get ignored (work efficiency goal not met)



Example 3

- Theme: 'preferences for choosing communication medium'
- Strategy: 'I prefer to use email at work to communicate with people'
- Positive Reason: To avoid confrontation and negative conversations (well-being goal met)
- Negative Reason: Fail to learn communication skills needed to do my job (work efficiency goal not met)



'Addictive' behaviours



1. *When I have been using email I can feel disengaged from reality*
2. *I experience 'phantom alerts' (whereby I think I have heard a beep/felt a vibration/seen a message icon, but - on checking for the arrival of an email - I realise that nothing has actually occurred)*
3. *I feel anxious about deleting email messages*
4. *When I don't have access to email (e.g. smartphone broken, email system down, no signal) I feel anxious*
5. *I feel compelled to constantly check my email*
6. *I am comforted by the presence of my device/smartphone, when not at my desk*

Satisfaction of goals

- Most commonly reported positive goal reasons
 - Work efficiency (30%)
 - Well-being (19%)
 - Control (15%)
 - Concern for others (12%)
- Most commonly reported negative goal repercussions
 - Work efficiency (33%)
 - Concern for others (28%)
 - Control (18%)
 - Well-being (16%)

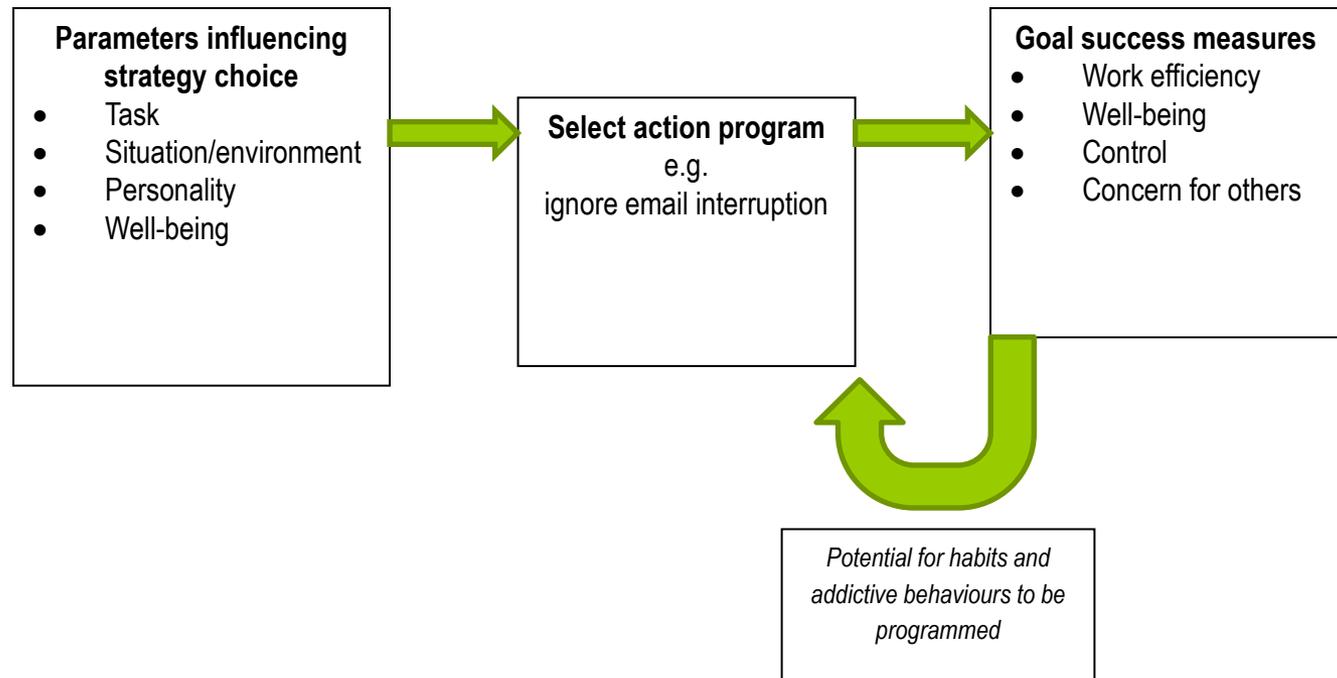
Phase Two Priorities

- Large scale survey of email use (on-line questionnaire) to examine:
 - Personality and stated goal reasons
 - *E.g. Do neurotic people choose strategies to 'improve their work efficiency'?*
 - Well-being and strategy choice/addictive behaviours
 - *E.g. Do people experiencing negative affect exhibit more 'pathological' behaviours (addictions and habits with no goal reasons)?*
 - Are certain strategies more/less associated with personality and well-being?
 - *E.g. Are extraverts more likely to have alerts on? Do people with positive affect profiles frequently delete their email?*

Theoretical Implications

- Redefining 'efficiency' and 'success' in strategic behaviour – a balance of meeting work goals, well-being goals and other goals.
- Including internal 'person' factors (well-being and personality) as being predictors in models of strategic behaviour
 - Predictors of strategy choice
 - Predictors of goal reasons
- Challenging criteria for specifying addictive/pathological email use

Model of strategic behaviour



Practical Implications

- Reminding people to be mindful that whilst certain strategies may improve their work efficiency they may have negative repercussions for well-being, other people, control, etc.
- Providing recommendations to different personalities, according to which strategies work best for them.
- Providing generic recommendations about strategies that have largely positive effects...
- ... and those that have largely negative effects, and which should be avoided

Today's recommendations...

- Strategies receiving most negative repercussions (avoid these):
 - Ignoring email (not reading or responding to a message)
 - Using automated rules, labels and codes to organise system
 - Email ping-pong or chaining
 - Checks/deals with email in company or meetings
 - OUT OF HOURS deals with email in the usual way
 - Choosing email as the preferred communication mode
 - *Checking email on alert given as many negative repercussions as checking email periodically....*

Today's recommendations...

- Strategies receiving least negative repercussions (use these):
 - Checks email quickly but weighs up work priorities before deciding to action
 - OUT OF HOURS will review/check email but not respond, or send 'holding' email
 - OUT OF HOURS will not deal with work email
 - Aims to reply to email in given time frame
 - Deletes email when read or actioned
 - Provides a clear and specific subject line
 - Sends targeted email only to relevant recipients

Overall tips...

- Which strategies are you using out of habit – revisit these and reconsider them
- Consider your reasons for using a strategy. Does it:
 - Improve work performance
 - Improve well-being
 - Allow you to feel in control
 - Show concern to other people

If not then consider whether this is a strategy that you should be using
- Try to be consistent in your strategic approach, so that people know what to expect from you.

Summary

- Email interruptions are not necessarily a bad thing
- Internal factors (wellbeing, personality and goal priorities) influence and are influenced by our strategic behaviour
- ‘Successful’ or ‘efficient’ strategies consider more than just achievement of work goals. Improving well-being, control and showing concern to others are involved
- Managing our email communications effectively depends upon balancing the above

Finally

- Thank you for listening!
- To take part in the email survey (phase two) please contact me:

e.russell@kingston.ac.uk

- Any questions?